

Orthodox Ecclesiology in Sophianic Key An Analysis of Sergei Bulgakov's Ecclesiological Vision

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Abstract

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This article treats the connections between sophiology and ecclesiology, a connection clearly seen in the writings of Sergei Bulgakov, though seldom analyzed there or seen elsewhere. In the present study, after introducing the sophiological question, the author analyzes several key ecclesiological elements Bulgakov addressed in various studies. The present study claims that a re-appropriation of Bulgakov's ecclesiology might prove salutary both for the modern ecumenical dialogue as well as for the Orthodox Church as such, especially in addressing the growing concerns as to the clericalization of ecclesial processes of governance – synods, diocesan assemblies, and cognate bodies.



Introduction

Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) is mainly known for his sophiology, although studies on his ecclesiology or ecumenical vision are not lacking either. However, Bulgakov's works have only recently been published in languages other than Russian, and much remains to be done since he was an extremely proli-

fic author,¹ writing twenty-eight volumes and hundreds of articles counting around 20,000 pages, not all of them easily comprehensible or accessible.²

In the present study we propose to re-visit Bulgakov's ecclesiological perspective starting from his sophianic vision. It is not our intention to judge the Orthodoxy of his sophiology. It is nonetheless impressive to see how seriously Bulgakov takes the idea that the Church is a pre-creation reality. His understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ and as His Bride read through the sophiological prism puts the understanding of the visible-hierarchical Church in a new perspective. One might say that Bulgakov's ecclesiology betrays post-modern features.³ Because of his sophiological-based ecclesiology the Church becomes the place of diversity though it remains a unity; it becomes the multi-unity, which, as a living organism, deals with the question of truth and authority in a non-imposing manner. His ecclesiology attempts to keep the balance between authority and freedom in the Church, between law and Spirit, between Bible and Tradition. The heart of his ecclesiology remained, as for the Slavophiles, the concept of *sobornost*, which will become in the modern ecumenical dialogue the concept of "communion," although in a somewhat limited sense.

1. *Recuperating Bulgakov*

Theologians, like Michael Plekon, have argued that neither Bulgakov, nor other theologians of the so-called Russian Silver Age, are studied within Orthodox institutions or "discussed with regularity in scholarly writings"; they are "never really brought into the mainstream of theological endeavor in

¹ For a comprehensive list of Bulgakov's writings see *Bibliographie des oeuvres de Serge Boulgakov* établie par Kliment Naumov (Paris: Institut d'Etudes slaves, 1984).

² Nikita Struve, 'Lire Boulgakov', dans *Le messager orthodoxe* 152:1(2012): 13–20, here 13.

³ By this I refer to Lyotard's understanding of post-modernity as the end of the grand narratives.

the West.”⁴ With Plekon, others have also remarked that Bulgakov received more attention from the non-Orthodox than from the Orthodox.⁵ Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that there is an increasing interest in Bulgakov’s work.⁶ Some authors call for a reassessment of Bulgakov’s legacy.⁷ Others seem to have already opened the process for Bulgakov’s canonization, as is the case with the historian Antoine Arjakovsky, who speaks of Bulgakov as a “saint” of the Church.⁸

Bulgakov’s personality attracted without any doubt many of his students and colleagues alike, both from St. Serge and elsewhere. His lectures made a profound impression on many of those who attended his classes at Saint-Serge Institute or who saw him celebrating the Divine Liturgy. Among them, one encounters Evdokimov, Schmemmann, Andronikov, Mélia, Afanasiev and others. Outside the classroom, Bulgakov was also a “much sought after confessor and counselor,”⁹ and revered priest, as one can see from the testimony given by one of his former students:

⁴ Michal Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 32.

⁵ Robert Bird, “The Tragedy of Russian Religious Philosophy: Sergei Bulgakov and the Future of Orthodox Theology” in ed. Jonathan Sutton and Wil van den Bercken, *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 211–228, 211.

⁶ See for example Adrian Pabst and Christopher Schneider, ed., *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World Through the Word* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); Sergii Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999). Antoine Arjakovsky offers a more comprehensive account of Bulgakov’s reception in modern theology: Antoine Arjakovsky, “The Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov and Contemporary Western Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* (hereafter *SVTQ*) 49 (2005): 219–235.

⁷ See, e.g., Myroslaw Tataryn, “Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944): Time for a New Look,” *SVTQ* 42 (1998): 315–338; Thomas Hopko, “Receiving Fr. Bulgakov,” *SVTQ* 42 (1998): 373–383; Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson, ed., *Russian Religious Thought* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

⁸ See Arjakovsky, *Essai sur le père Serge Boulgakov*.

⁹ Plekon, *Living Icons*, 40.